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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest presents an overview of small-scale schooling in an international context; examines demographic data, staffing problems, and incentives used in other nations; and points out the distinctive characteristics and unique value and potential of small schools in both industrialized and developing nations. Rural school populations remain significant in most countries and even in the most industrialized countries, small rural schools are still the rule rather than the exception. The plight of small schools has, however, grown worse in both industrialized and developing nations. Stereotypes of small schools and their settings are misleading; these schools are diverse, and their characteristics vary substantially, even within a single nation. Small schools have survived out of necessity in industrialized and developing nations alike. Although no one definition of "rural" or "small" applies to all countries and settings, the strengths and needs of small schools transcend national boundaries. Small schools will not disappear in the foreseeable future because the rural populations served by small schools will continue to be substantial, even as industrialization proceeds. The strengths of small schools, as well as their evident needs, are significant, and policies should attend to both. Because of their diversity, small schools cannot be well served by a single policy even within a given nation. Policies to support small schools must consider the specific local or regional context, so that the needs of small schools can be met at the same time. This digest lists 10 references. (ALL)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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Small Schools: An International Overview

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BECAUSE THEY USUALLY FUNCTION in rural areas (either in mid-sized towns, small villages, or open country), far from the seats of government and administrative concern, the plight of small schools in both industrialized and developing nations has grown worse in recent years (for example, Angus, 1980; Fuller, 1986). Although no one definition of "rural" or "small" applies equally well to all countries and settings, the needs of small schools transcend national boundaries. According to some observers, educational policymakers and managers in many nations have consistently underrated the virtues of small schools, or even discriminated against them outright (for example, Sher, 1981).

This digest presents an overview of the commonalities of small-scale schooling in an international context. It sketches a wider scope for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of small schools. The discussion examines demographic data, staffing problems and incentives used in other nations, and characterizes the value that small schools situated in sparsely populated places may have.

Small schools as a rural phenomenon

While most small schools in other nations are located in rural areas, stereotypes of small schools and their settings are misleading. Despite the common impression of Japan, for example, as an overwhelmingly urban nation, 85% of its land mass is rural (Parrett, 1987). Australia, on the other hand, though it contains vast tracts of virtually uninhabited land, is one of the most urban countries in the world: 70% of its population lives in cities near the coast, and only 15% of its workforce engages in rural industries (Angus, 1979).

The forces of urbanization and industrialization are hallmarks of the history of this century (Angus, 1980; Sher, 1981). In a great many countries, however, where the percentage of rural residents dropped after World War II, the actual *number* of rural inhabitants remained fairly stable (Sher, 1981). Among member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in fact, the number of rural residents *increased* in the 30 years following the Second World War. Some demographers see an expansion of urban-to-rural migration in OECD countries that mirrors the similar phenomenon that took place in the United States during the 1970s (Sher, 1981).

Rural school populations remain significant in most countries overseas; and the political base in those countries for active government attention exists (Sher, 1981). In some countries, for example Japan, rural education has never been accorded inferior status (Parrett, 1987). By contrast, educators in the United States are worried about the erosion of rural representation (for example, Stephens, 1988). Fuller (1986), however, reports that in the poorest developing countries the quality of primary education—which takes place in small schools—is eroding.

Prevalence and endurance of small schools

Surprisingly, even in the most industrialized countries, small rural schools (especially at the elementary level) are still the rule rather than the exception. These schools usually employ a faculty of three or fewer, and student enrollments usually fall somewhere below 100 (for example, Bell & Sigsworth, 1987). In contrast to urban schools, where some kind of bureaucratic presence is often greater, these schools tend to be less specialized and less well-equipped.

The varying sizes of these schools yield differences in what they can do for their students, and evaluations of such schools often provide contradictory testimonials:

> Small and rural schools are so diverse, especially when viewed internationally, that one can find evidence to support nearly any characterization. Someone wishing to describe these institutions as ineffective, stifling, third-rate, or worse will have little trouble finding schools that fully deserve such criticisms. However, another person desirous of portraying small rural schools as innovative, high-performance, delightful places will have equal ease in justifying such a glowing assessment. (Sher, 1981)

Over the years, in industrialized nations, most small schools have survived out of necessity. Usually, there have been no schools nearby with which to consolidate. In the developing nations, of course, consolidation of small schools is hampered by poor roads and the exorbitant costs of mechanized transport.

Recently, attempts to close smaller schools in industrialized nations seem to have slowed or ended altogether in some countries. Resistance to consolidation and reorganization has grown more vocal and has become better organized (Sher, 1981). In the developing countries, where consolidation has not been a challenge, small schools struggle under severe resource limitations, and it is not uncommon for a single textbook to serve as many as 80 students (Cohn & Rossmiller, 1987). Even in industrialized countries, however, small rural schools do not have the instructional resources of larger schools (for example, Honeyman, Thompson, & Wood, 1989).

The cost of educating students in remote areas is high—in some cases, as much as four times the cost of educating them in urban areas (Angus, 1980). Lower teacher-student ratios, additional transportation considerations, and faculty accommodations compound expenses.

Whereas small schools in the industrialized nations have been advised to use available resources more wisely, in the less developed countries additional resources—for textbooks and other instructional materials—are probably more important for improving the quality of instruction (Cohn & Rossmiller, 1987). In the industrialized countries, however, comparatively greater wealth raises a similar

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issue. New instructional strategies—for example, the use of mobile resource centers, new teacher support mechanisms, communications technologies for distance learning, regional service centers—may help small schools prosper, if available resources are distributed to implement such strategies. The equitable distribution of such resources is a problem, according to some observers (for example, Honeyman et al., 1989).

Conditions of work

The isolation of teachers in small schools has marked effects on the working realities of day-to-day education. In British Columbia, for example, isolation often prompts teachers to leave their appointments to small rural schools; isolation, in fact, is the most frequently given reason for such departures (Haughey & Murphy, 1983).

Many small and rural schools compensate their staffs poorly, and opportunities for professional development are minimal. This is true of all countries, but especially those in developing nations (Cohn & Rossmiller, 1987). In developing nations, innovative projects target rural areas specifically, but teacher training is, in general, meager (for example, Cohn & Rossmiller, 1987; Ramirez, 1981). In industrialized countries very few colleges and universities, moreover, specifically train teachers for rural service (Angus, 1980; Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Sher, 1981).

On the other hand, industrialized countries in and out of the OECD compensate their rural teachers better than does the United States. Nearly all OECD countries have regional or national salary schedules; at a minimum, rural teachers are paid as much as their equally qualified urban counterparts (Angus, 1980; Sher, 1981). In Japan, administrators and teachers in rural schools receive *additional* compensation; moreover, the most remote assignments bring still higher salary increments (Parrett, 1987).

Recognizing and valuing uniqueness

In contemporary life, young people too seldom form relationships within their communities that foster strong senses of identity (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987). An education in a small rural school offers them clear opportunities to do so; it gives students a secure environment that increases their chances to be recognized as individuals.

Small schools, wherever they are, can help establish links between students and parents (compare Cohn & Rossmiller, 1987); it is more difficult for larger schools to achieve the same results (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987). But as long as small schools are judged by standards designed to evaluate larger schools, they will continue to appear deficient. When the distinctive characteristics of smaller schools are understood as potential advantages instead of static shortcomings, such institutions will have a chance to succeed and flourish (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987).

Conclusion

Small schools will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Around the world, rural populations served by small schools are substantial. For example, the combined rural population of the 24 OECD countries is greater than the combined population of the world's 25 largest metropolitan areas. According to Sher (1981), small schools are not marginal: Their strengths, as well as their evident needs, are significant, and policies should attend to both.

At the same time, distinctions between "small" and "rural" not only vary from country to country, but within each nation as well. For this reason, a single policy will not serve well all small schools even within a given nation. Policies to support small schools must consider the way in which a given local or regional context can be used to meet the needs of small schools while preserving and strengthening their advantages.

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